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ABSTRACT

A survey addressing the fairness of the Cincinnati (Ohio) Design for School Excellence (DSE) Merit Schools program was administered to school principals in March, 1986. The questionnaire was developed by a representative committee of elementary and secondary principals and central office personnel not directly involved in the original development of the DSE. The survey was reviewed, modified, and approved by the Cincinnati Association of Administrators and Supervisors (CAAS) Executive Committee. Forty-eight principals or 60% responded. Principals were asked to rank on a four point scale their perception of fairness of the 11 DSE indicators. Results showed a need for steps to be taken to adjust and clarify the program to increase its acceptance. Particular problems and concerns about the DSE were expressed in four major areas: (1) some schools have more advantages; (2) merit variables based on attitude surveys have limited validity; (3) attendance problems do not affect schools equally; and (4) student mobility and entry level aptitude affect schools unevenly. Since the DSE was strongly supported by the Board of Education and top central administrators, CAAS made 10 recommendations for improvement; their status is summarized. (Selected questionnaire responses are also appended.) (KSA)

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IDENTIFYING MERIT SCHOOLS? -- WHAT DO PRINCIPALS THINK?

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IDENTIFYING MERIT SCHOOLS? -- WHAT DO PRINCIPALS THINK?

In late fall of 1985, twenty-four schools were selected as "merit schools" in the Cincinnati Design for School Excellence (DSE). As it might in any big city school system, recognizing specific schools for their accomplishments immediately raised a swirl of questions and concerns about the means used for ranking schools. To separate fact from fiction, the Cincinnati Association of Administrators and Supervisors (CAAS), Cincinnati's recognized representative of public school administrators, organized a survey of principals in March, 1986. The purpose of the survey was to collect information for framing CAAS's response to the Design for School Excellence program. In particular, the CAAS Executive Committee was concerned with the following research questions: Did principals view the program as a fair one offering realistic opportunities to achieve merit school standing? Were there persistant and substantive criticisms of program elements, especially related to the means used to measure each outcome variable identifying merit schools? What recommendations could CAAS advance for program improvement?

A survey to address these questions in detail was developed by a representative committee of elementary principals, secondary principals and central office personnel not directly involved in the original development of the DSE program. The survey was reviewed, modified and approved by the CAAS Executive Committee. Forty-eight principals responded (60%). This paper will summarize findings related to the research questions, and report on the response to CAAS recommendations to date.

Perceived Fairness of the Design for School Excellence

First, principals were asked to rank the measurement of each of the merit variables on a four point scale: 1 = Very Unfair; 2 = Unfair; 3 = Reasonably Fair; 4 = Very Fair. Table 1 reports these results. The average rating for

every merit variable was close to 3.0 (Reasonably Fair). The highest rated variables were those measured by the California Achievement Test. Only four principals viewed these measures as unfair or very unfair. The lowest rated variables were those measured by attitude surveys from students, parents and teachers. Between eleven and thirteen principals (about one quarter of those responding) viewed these as unfair or very unfair. The measurement of student attendance as a merit variable was also ranked relatively low, with twelve principals concerned over the fairness of this variable. Nevertheless, the lowest rated variable was 2.8 on a four point scale, which in part was an artifact of the scale used that left no middle ground between Unfair and Reasonably Fair. The CAAS Executive Committee concluded that, overall, the Design for School Excellence was grudgingly accepted, despite the reservations and concerns of a significant group of principals.

Results from a second question supported this conclusion. Principals were asked if the standard for achieving merit status (merit standing from status or gain on a majority of indicators) made it realistic for their school to achieve merit school status. Twenty principals said Yes; fifteen said Maybe; seven said No. The usefulness of this question in particular was limited by the fact that approximately forty percent of the principals did not reply to the survey. The high percentage of those answering Maybe suggested that steps should be taken to adjust and clarify the program to increase its acceptance. Many principals were still taking a wait and see approach.

Criticisms of Program Elements

Principals were sharpest when given the opportunity to sound off about particular problems and concerns they had with the Design for School Excellence. The twenty-four comments in this section of the questionnaire are

TABLE 1.

PERCEIVED FAIRNESS OF MEASUREMENT METHODS:

	MERIT VARIABLES	VERY UNFAIR	UNFAIR	REASONABLY FAIR	VERY FAIR	AVG
1.	Achievement in Reading (CAT Tests)*	1	3	24	20	3.3
2.	Achievement in Mathematics (CAT Tests)*	1	3	24	20	3.3
3.	Student Attendance (Principal's Report)*	5	7	20	14	2.9
4.	Writing Mastery (MC Test)	2	2	28	12	3.1
5.	Staff Attendance (Personnel Report)	4	5	25	11	2.9
6.	Attitude to Inter-Racial Understanding (SIS)	5	8	23	8	3.2
7.	Attitude Toward Discipline (SIS)	3	10	27	4	2.9
8.	Teacher Attitude Toward School (SIS)	2	10	24	8	2.9
9.	Parent Attitude Toward School (SIS)	4	8	25	8	2.8
10.	Student Attitude Toward School (SIS)	2	9	25	9	2.8
11.	Optional Indicator	3	1	17	10	3.0

*Required Criteria

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included in Appendix 1. The committee grouped the concerns expressed into four major themes.

Theme 1. Some Schools Have More Advantages.

Strains related to the differences between neighborhood and alternative schools surfaced in this survey. Many neighborhood school principals believed that schools with greater opportunities for student selection and with school populations with higher SES background would inevitably be at the top of the list of schools scoring high on each variable. These schools were seen as having so many inherent advantages that the legitimacy of any ranking system could be called into question. Schools that did not make merit standing on "status" were seen by some as not justified in having high expectations for qualifying on the status criteria in the future, simply because the other schools would be so far ahead.

Another variation on this theme was the sentiment that central office branches and departments deserved the opportunity to be recognized and publicized as meritorious. This reaction stemmed from a sense that central administration had buffered itself from the competition and exposure it was visiting upon schools in the name of excellence. There was also a concern that parent, student and teacher attitude toward individual schools were directly influenced by their perception of centralized services (transportation, data processing, special education, student personnel, testing, etc.) that were not directly controlled by schools.

Theme 2. Merit Variables Based on Attitude Surveys Have Limited Validity.

Five of the ten merit variables were attitudinal variables based on Student Information System (SIS) surveys. Principals questioned the face validity of these surveys, rating them as less than reasonably fair. Ten of the twenty-four comments in the problems/concerns section of the survey were

critical of SIS surveys. Principals doubted whether respondents truly understood the questions and had adequate information to answer. They wondered whether survey results were amenable to improvement based on initiatives within the school. They suspected that schools with select populations had advantages on these variables. They questioned whether complex, global issues like "inter-racial understanding," "discipline," or "attitude toward school" could be validly sampled with four or five item scales. In short, principals felt frustrated over having their schools ranked on surveys they had administered for years for information purposes only.

Theme 3. Attendance Problems Do Not Affect Schools Equally.

Principals worried there were not enough safeguards in attendance accounting procedures. Exclusions for immunizations or other health problems like lice could blow an otherwise high attendance record. Schools with high expulsion/suspension rates would hurt their own attendance. Since attendance was presumed to correlate with SES, again certain schools would be handicapped.

Theme 4. Student Mobility and Entry Level Aptitude Affect Schools Unevenly.

One of the sorest points for some principals was that their achievement and attendance were being measured in a student population that had not all spent the full time in their buildings. Students who transferred into a school even days before testing were counted with the school where they tested. The end of second quarter was a time, two months before achievement testing, when many students returned to their district school after failing to become successfully adjusted to an alternative school program. Trying to improve achievement in a school with high mobility was like trying to hit a moving target using tools that take a long time to produce results.

Further, many principals felt they needed extensive attitude and commitment changes on the part of their teaching staffs to make a real dent in achievement. They saw many teachers as believing that entry level aptitude and prior achievement of students set limits on how much improvement could be expected. Some principals undoubtedly shared the same view. In their minds, high mobility and low entry level aptitude made the playing field even more uneven for competition.

Recommendations Related to Critical Themes

It's always harder for outsiders not familiar in detail with the technical details of implementation to recommend practical alternatives that accomplish agreed upon ends. Nevertheless, since it was clear that the Design for School Excellence was strongly supported by the Board of Education and top central administration, CAAS hazarded recommendations related to each critical theme, as follows.

Recommendations Related to Theme 1.

1. Place more weight on gain components without eliminating the status recognition. Reward gain more generously for merit determination.

2. Extend supplemental planning and personnel resources to non-merit schools with specific improvement plans.

3. Develop and implement a Design for Branch Excellence based both on variables common to DSE (staff attendance, inter-racial understanding, client satisfaction) and output variables unique to each branch.

Recommendations Related to Theme 2.

4. Reduce the number and percent of merit variables based on perceptual surveys by collapsing existing variables (for example, client satisfaction replacing parent and student attitude, quality of human relations replacing

inter-racial understanding and discipline, eliminating "teacher attitude toward school").

5. Develop a plan to address and resolve principal concerns about the validity of the surveys. The plan should include a principal advisory committee, and demonstration from actual case studies how SIS variables have been used to diagnose school problems and how SIS results have changed in reflection of school improvements.

6. Reduce the number of SIS survey summary reports printed on multi-colored papers.

Recommendation Related to Theme 3.

7. Develop a form making it convenient for principals to record anomalies in student and staff attendance throughout the year. Prior to finalizing staff and student attendance results for DSE, an evaluator or administrative researcher with decision-making authority should confer with the principal to determine that a fair accounting for each anomaly is reflected in final attendance results.

Recommendations Related to Theme 4.

8. Explore the feasibility of adding corrective factors recognizing the increased difficulty of improving achievement when high mobility is present. In particular, base NCE gains on matched promoted students who remained in the same school for the entire year between pre and post testing.

9. Examine district policies to find ways to reduce student mobility.

10. Review research literature and report to principals to clarify whether diffential achievement gains are to be expected with student populations who have varying entry level aptitude.

Response to CAAS Recommendations

A report containing the CAAS analysis and recommendations for improving the Design for School Excellence was taken to the Superintendant's Cabinet and formed an agenda item during several meetings. Based on Cabinet discussion, the Director of Evaluation was asked to report back to Cabinet and to the CAAS committee who produced the survey concerning the district response to the recommendations. This process was interrupted by a change in superintendants, since the superintendant who had defined the response process was replaced after a period of uncertainty. While a new superintendant was taking command, the process of identifying merit schools continued on its usual timetable, and it was decided to delay the response process until after the second round of merit schools was identified. The following responses to each recommendation summarize the status quo.

Recommendations	Response
1. Reward gain more generously.	1. This recommendation was questioned on philosophical grounds. Gain is computed on an annual basis, with the top 40% of schools showing gain on a variable being recognized. To recognize half the schools (setting the criterion at the top 50%, for example) was viewed as watering down the concept of merit.
2. Provide supplemental planning and personnel resources to non-merit schools.	2. No additional resources will be allocated through the Design for School Excellence.
3. Develop and implement a Design for Branch Excellence.	3. Cabinet appeared receptive to further consideration of this item, particularly if CAAS advocates it.

4. Reduce the number of variables based on SIS surveys by collapsing variables together.	4. No change. Attitude variables were included as a way to allow low achieving schools to gain merit. For example, 70% of elementary and secondary schools now achieve merit on status for teacher attitude toward school. Attitude variables are less correlated with each other than are the required variables, making it more possible for schools to perform well on different variables. Politically, the SIS surveys are also less open to criticism since they have been relied upon for years as a valid and reliable information tool. To acknowledge weaknesses now throws other uses of SIS into question. Inter-racial understanding remains the weakest link. The reliability of the scale items is lowest, particularly in elementary schools. Racially isolated schools (90/10) are not included on the attitude measures. To be awarded merit, area directors also have to approve of the school's plan to reduce racial isolation, using unknown criteria. Despite the importance of the inter-racial understanding variable, it is the most difficult to measure reliably and validly.

5. Develop a plan to resolve principal concerns about the validity of SIS variables.	5. Dialogue with CAAS is a step in this direction. There are very little validity data available. CAAS should push for a role in the evaluation of DSE and emphasize validity studies (for example, one on one interviews with students and parents to determine what comes to their minds in answering survey questions).
6. Reduce SIS survey reports on multi-colored paper.	6. Done.
7. Develop a form to record anomalies in student and staff attendance.	7. No major need for this was acknowledged. Principals are encouraged to document and report anomalies on an individual basis, but no centralized method is being considered.

8. Add a corrective factor to weight achievement in schools with high mobility.	8. No changes yet, but the door appears to be open to explore using matched promoted students within the same school only. "Matched promoted students within the same school" means those pupils who were at a school both last year and the current year through the testing period. Stability of school enrollment ranges from a low of 65% to an average of 85%. It would be more fair to correct for mobility, since mobile students show a bigger achievement loss and lower attendance.
9. Examine district policies to find ways to reduce mobility.	9. New mobility policies are being developed independently of this CAAS recommendation.
10. Review research on whether differential achievement gains are to be expected with student populations having varied entry level aptitude.	10. Low scoring schools are seen to be well positioned to make gains. To date, gain scores do not correlate well with status. Cincinnati has been most successful in moving below average students to the average range. Above average students have a tendency to fall back into the average range. No further research on this topic is planned.

Conclusions

A. One immediate change has resulted from CAAS recommendations--the elimination of multiple reports. CAAS support for changes in mobility policies reinforced pressures to address mobility from other directions. Many CAAS recommendations are essentially still caught in the transition period betweeen superintendants, and are being tabled for consideration when formal program evaluation of DSE takes place.

B. CAAS should lobby with the Superintendant for an early evaluation of the Design for School Excellence to be implemented immediately after the next round of merit school selection. This would be in accordance with the earlier dates in the original plan which called for evaluation after three to five years. CAAS should coordinate this advocacy with the Director of Evaluation.

C. Four issues should be stressed during evaluation.

1. CAAS should have a formal role in planning and implementing the evaluation.

2. Matched promoted students within the same school should be reviewed as a better data source for achievement, one which would reduce the negative impact of mobility on achievement and attendance.

3. CAAS total membership reaction to the idea of a Design for Branch Excellence should be analyzed more carefully before CAAS takes a final advocacy position on this issue.

4. Validity studies of variables based on SIS surveys should be a component of the evaluation of all variables based on surveys.

In sum, Cincinnati principals are working through their representative organization to improve the Design for School Excellence so it can be even more widely perceived as a fair and helpful way to identify and promote excellence in education.

APPENDIX A.

DESCRIBE ANY PARTICULAR PROBLEMS OR CONCERNS YOU HAVE WITH THE DESIGN FOR SCHOOL EXCELLENCE PROCESS. RECOMMEND WAYS DESIGN FOR SCHOOL EXCELLENCE CAN BE IMPROVED.

1. Five of the varibles are determined by SIS Surveys. Our SIS Surveys will not improve unless we cheat.

2. I feel that we already have more than enough competition among schools. Why add more? If we absolutely have to have the DFSE, then why not extend it to the Central Office Departments? I suggest a "Design for Department excellence" with competitiion among departments on staff attendance, interracial understanding, staff attitude, client attitude, etc.!

3. Weights should be applied to the academic component to compensate for items such as high mobility. With 42% mobility, we are often testing large numbers of pupils who have spent little time being taught by the current staff. The closer we draw to CAT Testing the greater the flow of pupils coming from other schools, the test results reflect the gains and/or loses of other schools' efforts.

   Further more, weights are needed wherein standardized testing has reflected large blocks, even whole grades, reflecting 0% at or above national norm. (inaptitude). Therefore, requiring achievement scores at and above national norm would require an over achievement status of those pupils.

4. If this process is to improve Bloom it will take time. Factual data will move slowly. Perceptive data will also change gradually - there is an aura set-up that will take time to change.

5. Please refer to memo to CAAS 1/15/86 on K-8 schools on DSE. K-8 schools are treated just like K-6 and K-3 schools on attendance performance! SIS and CAT results are treated like elementary sometimes and middle schools sometimes. We need continuity in result reporting. We'll never make 93% attendance with 7 and 8 included.

6. It is another task that the building principal has to deal with. Our whole system is run on somebody's survey results.

7. This is really regarding the SIS surveys which are used in DSE. I feel that frequently the persons answering the items do not understand the questions. I feel too much weight is given to the surveys.

8. The merit school process should be abolished! It certainly affects staff morale when teachers try their best and statistics don't measure up to merit status.

9. A very difficult task. No suggestions. Seems basically fair.

10. It works fine at this school but I can see some of my other schools never making the grade.

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11. We were merit in 9 of 10 catagories. I personally believe to be removed from being of merit quality due to snow days and yellow busses not running is absurd. We have a policy that states students from alternative schools are to report to neighborhood schools on snow days. Students SHOULD BE MARKED ABSENT WHEN THEY ARE NOT IN ATTENDANCE FOR WHATEVER REASON. I lost out being a merit school because I followed district policy on this. Also, do not count staff/student attendance as REQUIRED indicators as they are the hardest to control. What counts for merit recognition is the QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM not how many days it snows or how many pregnant teachers miss school during the school year. Keep these two as indicators but not as required ones. We could be the laughing stock of the area if we define our merit schools according to how many days it snows and busses don't run and how many teachers get pregnant during September - June. Use EDUCATIONAL factors as required - not attendance. Our parents, students, teacher attitudes are always EXCELLENT. This should be a required indicator as it indicates attitudes toward the educational program. Our parents were quit upset when we lost merit standing due to a snow day to many last year. I agree with them 100%

12. Our staff feels that we have always been a merit school, therefore parents expected that we would be so "acclaimed." It really puts the pressure on us.

13. I understand attitude toward interracial understanding is required criteria for merit status in 1986-87school year. Carson has the highest white percentage of students in the system. Even though I am trying my best, there is not way I can by myself change the attitudes of parents, students, teachers, and community enough to qualify as a merit school under these conditions. We are a merit school now - because of qualifying reading, math, and writing plus attendance ratings. I regret a school not being "Merit" because of an "Attitude" survey.

14. My concern is that so much importance is placed on Attitude which may not reflect fact or reality. How can the impact of alternative schools on the quality of neighborhood schools be factored into this process?

15. As I began on the reverse side, the whole process is unfair. We have created a dual school system. If we are going to do this it should be based on gains only unless a school reaches perfection, which is unlikely. That way schools with a select population and/or additional resources could not attain merit status each year.

16. The parent survey - is very difficult to receive from parents on the secondary level. Moreover, the merit variables could in fact vary from year to year. The surveys it appears to be unfair to be included in the merit variables. A team developed to work with secondary schools would be appropriate.

17. Progress reports at more frequest intervals such as every three weeks.

18. I have a great problem with using NCE as a standard. I have 62 - 67% mobility. This is not taken into consideration. We must compete with schools that have only 3% mobility. RIDICULOUS!!! Sorry, I realy have nothing positive to say.

19. I believe the surveys need to be looked at again. I have a problem with some of the questions. In my opinion the survey should be given later in the year after the parents have a better idea of what is happening, as well as the students. December is very soon in the case of a new administrator as well as kindergarten parents. Mid April would tell a better story.

20. Use of SIS data is too subjective. We need to know WHAT is meant by respndents when questions are answered

21. SIS is the weak link. Timing, % of return, wording, etc., are factors that make you doubt their validity

22. Staff is upset with having sick days and personal days available and yet their attendance is being monitored.

23. I feel there needs to be closer follow-up. Each school needs to be taught "How" to implement the program with a progress reporting system which should be done on a monthly basis (at least).

24. NCE Gain/Loss and Writing Mastery: Schools with high mobility rate have a disadvantage in the measurement of NCE loss/gain. These schools also tend to have pupils with other problems which negatively invluence their achievement. Alternative schools tend to have a low mobility rate and an advantage.

Recommendation: Factor in the mobility rate variable.

Student Attendance: Several factors negatively impact student attendance: (1) absences due to lice, (2) absences due to suspensions.

Recommendation: Do not count these absences.

Staff Attendance: Extended absences due to childbirth, surgery, and serious illness negatively influence staff attendance.

Recommendation: Do not count these days.